

APPLIED  
PAGE 5 (Part II)

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# Disinformation It's Not

## Labeling of Sandinista Lobbying Impugns Foes of Contra Aid

By ERNEST CONINE

It may seem picky to quarrel with the Reagan Administration over a mere word, but officials really should be careful about attaching the disinformation label to the prospective Washington lobbying campaign by the Sandinista government.

The point is not that the Marxist elements who run Nicaragua are nice guys; because the evidence suggests otherwise. Nor should anyone imagine them incapable of falsehood and deception.

But it is mischievous to use the word disinformation, which has a special meaning among the world's intelligence services, to describe the sort of campaign that is apparently planned by the Nicaraguan government.

A few days ago President Reagan called in congressional leaders for a briefing on what was described as a Nicaraguan "disinformation" program designed to encourage public and congressional opposition to military aid to the *contras*, who are fighting to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The Sandinista campaign, according to those attending the briefing, is expected to include invitations for media visits to Nicaragua, interviews with high-ranking Nicaraguan government officials, sit-ins in Washington by sympathetic U.S. "peace" activists and distribution of information calculated to show that the contra cause is both wrong and hopeless.

If that's all there is to it, the big Sandinista campaign won't be very different from lobbying campaigns carried on in the past by other countries—including Israel and South Africa.

From the Administration's perspective, the Sandinistas are not so much interested in telling the facts about the struggle in Nicaragua as in misrepresenting them. And that could be true. But, as the White House well knows, there is a difference between misinformation—even bald-faced lying—and disinformation, as that term is usually employed by governments.

The major difference is the use of forgery and other techniques to create false information or evidence embarrassing to an adversary, while also contriving to make the fake information more credible by falsifying the source.

All major intelligence services, including our own, are believed to indulge in a certain amount of disinformation. By general agreement, however, nobody is as active in the field as the Soviets are.

The very word disinformation was coined by the Soviets, whose KGB secret service is said by defectors to have a large section devoted to influencing Western public opinion through *dezinformatsia* and other so-called "active measures."

The purpose of Soviet disinformation efforts is to gain public acceptance for something that is not true. Since Soviet media lack credibility, the goal is to achieve publication in non-communist outlets. The falsehood is usually exposed in fairly short order, but the Soviets calculate that a denial will never entirely offset the damage done by a false report.

One tool of disinformation practitioners, especially in Third World countries, is plant bribery. Money is slipped to a cooperative journalist or editor to write or publish a false story without mentioning the Soviets as the source. But forgeries play a more important role.

Mailing the fabrication to newsmen without a return address or with a false one is a common method. Frequently the document is accompanied by a genuine-looking cover letter. And usually the false report is mixed with factual material to lend credibility to the whole package.

Once a false story is planted in a non-Soviet outlet, Moscow's propaganda organs pick it up and circulate it worldwide.

Numerous cases of disinformation have been chronicled in congressional testimony and in works by American scholars.

In November, 1981, Mailgrams were sent to at least 10 Washington correspondents, purportedly from U.S. government officials, offering to make available the text of an alleged secret agreement for American use of an intelligence facility in neutral Sweden.

No such agreement existed. The apparent aim was to offset the bad publicity that Moscow was getting at the time over the intrusions of Soviet submarines into Swedish waters.

In 1983 two Nigerian newspapers headlined charges that U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering had ordered the assassination of two Nigerian politicians. The story was based on a forged document purporting to be an internal embassy memo.

In a similar incident, a Ghanaian defense official angrily charged the U.S. Embassy with trying to overthrow the government. As "proof," he displayed a supposed West

German embassy report on the U.S. plot. The document was false, but the story was published in a leading Accra newspaper.

A fabricated American academic study outlining a supposed CIA plan to incite trouble within Islamic fundamentalist groups was exposed as a forgery in 1979, but reappeared in Cairo three years later.

One forgery, which originated in 1967 but was still surfacing as recently as 1983, was supposed to be a U.S. military planning document showing nuclear targets in Western Europe. The Soviet purpose obviously was to nourish European fears that Washington was planning to use Europe as a nuclear battleground.

The Sandinistas have hardly been innocent of such tactics. Two years ago Nicaraguan media published as factual a fake speech on U.S. policy toward the Third World by then-U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Bogus sections, clearly designed to exacerbate U.S.-Mexican differences, were highly critical of Mexico's policy in Central America.

But there is scant resemblance between these real-life examples of disinformation and what is known so far about the seemingly overt anti-contra campaign that is anticipated from the Sandinistas. Members of Congress from both parties are understandably irritated that the Administration has chosen to pretend otherwise.

They fear that anybody who merely listens to the Sandinista pitch, or suggests that neither side has a monopoly on the truth about what is going on in Nicaragua, will risk being labeled as a willing tool of the disinformation campaign.

To quote Sen. David Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the White House tactic potentially exposes any congressman who opposes aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels to charges of being "a stooge of communism."

Disinformation, as practiced by the Soviets and their allies, is serious business and deserves to be treated as such. It is frivolous to use the word to describe lobbying or public-relations campaigns that the Administration happens to find inconvenient.

*Ernest Conine is a Times editorial writer.*